HISTORY

Turning and turning in a widening gyre . . .

THE AMERICAN CENTURY
The Rise and Decline of the United States as a World Power
By Donald W. White. Yale University Press. 438 pp. $35.

THE FOURTH TURNING
An American Prophecy
By William Strauss and Neal Howe. Broadway Books. 352 pp. $27.50.

By David Kaiser

Donald W. White's survey of the United States and the world during the second half of the 20th century lays out the essential story of America's rise in the 1940s and 1950s and its relative decline – hardly amounting to a fall – since the Vietnam War. Drawing on popular literature and the press to capture the evolution of the national mood, he identifies two midcentury concepts of the United States' possible role: the American Century, as defined by Henry Luce of Time Inc., and the Century of the Common Man, as proposed by left-wing Democrat Henry Wallace.

In practice, White argues, the government pursued the former, seeking to establish the country's unquestioned preeminence and leadership in the world. This pursuit came to an end during the 1960s, both because of the military problems encountered in Vietnam and because of relative economic decline.

In conclusion, the author maintains that the United States comes to the end of the century showing no signs of returning to isolationism but having lost its opportunity to direct the course of world development for generations to come. White is a professional historian, and by academic standards his book is readable, informative and broad in scope. Alas, in our age of professional specialization, one must look outside the academy for works of true originality and breadth. One such is "The Fourth Turning" by William Strauss and Neal Howe, which shows how much more can be done with themes of rise, decline, birth, death and change.

Six years ago, in "Generations," Strauss and Howe laid out a provocative and immensely entertaining outline of American history, based on a four-stage cycle of generations and historical periods. Now, in a somewhat shorter, more focused and even more provocative sequel, they have recast their argument with an eye on the immediate future. There, they see an inspiring, chilling era of tragedy and triumph. The "fourth turning" to which their title refers is nothing less than a national crisis on the scale of the American Revolution, the Civil War, the Depression or the Second World War – and they expect it to arrive sometime during the next decade. That crisis will be the climax of the fourth great "saeculum" in American national life – they employ the Latin word referring to the span of a normal long life, that is, between 80 and 100 years. Their argument can be understood only with reference to history, but space does not allow all four of the great cycles of US history to be laid out. We can, however, understand their view of the current saeculum, which began around 1964, by analogies with two previous, completed ones: the (somewhat accelerated) Civil War saeculum from about 1822 through 1886, and the Great Power saeculum from 1886 through 1963.

Like every other saeculum, they argue, this one began with an Awakening – in this case, the consciousness revolution of the 1960s and '70s, parallel to the Transcendental Awakening of the 1820s and '30s (which gave rise to abolitionism, among other movements), and the Missionary Awakening of 1884-1908 (which focused on social issues). All Awakening eras feature social activism among the young, increased substance abuse and an emphasis on women's and minority rights. They are driven by young adults (most recently, the baby boomers) who are rebelling against the consensus of the "High" periods in which they grew up – the Jeffersonian High of roughly 1800-1820, the post-Civil War High of 1865-1885 and, most notably, the "American High" of 1945-1963, whose consensus atmosphere is so deeply missed by so many older Americans today.

Awakenings, however, produce ideological ferment rather than ideological consensus, and lead directly not to the golden age foreseen by the young people they stir but rather to an Unraveling in which divisions over values become worse and worse, and the glue that holds society together rapidly weakens. Few will be inclined to dispute the authors' contention that we now find ourselves in an "Unraveling" that began around 1984, parallel to the pre-Civil War crisis of 1844-1861 and the turbulent era of 1908-1929. Both these periods were marked by a general loosening of moral standards and a strong backlash in response; a splitting of the electorate along religious, ethnic and racial lines; an increasingly contentious tone in politics and a growth in votes for third parties; an explosion in crime; and an outburst of nativism in response to the new immigration. Sound familiar?

Another political parallel is equally chilling. From the 1830s through the early 1850s, the great "Compromise Generation" of Webster and Clay held things together until the eve of the Civil War. Its present-day generational counterpart is the Silent Generation (born 1926 through 1942), who have generally played a conciliatory political role, but who have never made it to the White House and are now fleeing the Congress in droves (see Sens. Nunn, Cohen, Heflin et al.), leaving national leadership to the more contentious baby boomers. Indeed, the authors openly hope for the election of a more conciliatory "Silent President" in 2000, perhaps to postpone the crisis for a few more years and give us time to prepare.

Unravelings have always had interesting effects within American homes, the authors also argue, and here, too, contemporary history is bearing them out. The generations with the most difficult childhoods are born during Awakenings and grow up during the Unravelings: the Gilded Generation that had to fight the Civil War, the Lost Generation (born 1883-1900, according to the authors, though the latter date should perhaps be 1905) and now Generation X, whom Strauss and Howe prefer to call the Thirteenth Generation. These young contemporaries of ours went through childhoods featuring an explosion of divorce, abortion, drug use, crime and a well-publicized erosion of educational standards.

Yet even six years ago, the authors' first book suggested that

something had changed dramatically around 1982, when society took a renewed interest in children, and movies began featuring cuddly infants rather than monsters (as in "The Exorcist," "Damien" or "Rosemary's Baby"). Now, of course, younger children have become the focus of the nation's political life, and their nurture and discipline have moved onto center stage of the national agenda. Boomers never asked their parents to help them do their homework; Generations Xers had little homework to do; but the new generation of Millennials asks for, and gets, help on their assignments almost every night of the week.

This is essential, as well as natural, the authors argue, because the Millennial Generation will inherit the task of their "GI" grandparents and great-grandparents: that of dealing with the next great crisis. Like those born from 1905 through 1925, they will be team players, able to band together to handle any task during their youth (building dams in the 1930s, winning World War II in the 1940s), and carrying the same can-do attitude through their middle years (roughly 2023-2045), which – provided they and their elders do successfully resolve the crisis – will be the scene of another great American High of confidence, rebuilt infrastructure and stable families. Nothing lasts forever, though, and when new and troubling events disturb the consensus, the children of the new High will begin a new Awakening, and aging Generation Xers and midlife Millennials will finally see firsthand what their parents went through in the famous 1960s.

"The Fourth Turning" is weakest on the point of greatest practical interest: what, exactly, the new crisis is likely to involve. The authors present a series of scenarios combining, in various ways, a financial crisis, a collapse of federal authority, a racial or regional civil war, or an international crisis perhaps involving terrorism – but none of them seems completely convincing. Yet here, too, history is on their side. No one in the 1760s would have predicted the American Revolution; almost no one in 1928 would have foreseen either depression or world war. Only in the 1850s was the shape of the coming crisis fairly clear, and even then few if any would have predicted war on such a scale, fought to such a drastic conclusion. We must watch, perhaps, for problems that fashionable solutions can only make worse, since these are the ones most likely to spin out of control.

As a baby boomer like the authors, I put down "The Fourth Turning" with a mixture of terror and excitement. Despite the turbulence of the last 30 years, most of us born during the High have lived relatively comfortable and rewarding lives, free of serious economic or physical threats to our well-being. It requires a big leap to believe that all this could change. Yet at the same time, my pulse quickens as I think that the next two decades could see the kinds of apocalyptic events in whose shadow I was born, and about which I have read all my life; that somewhere in my generation may lurk a Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt who will lead the nation through the crisis; and that if I live to be 100 – as hundred of thousands of my contemporaries are expected to do – I might even get a glimpse of the new Awakening. Strauss and Howe have taken a gamble. If the United States calmly makes it to 2015, their work will end up in the ashcan of history, but if they are right, they will take their place among the great American prophets. And they have given themselves and their contemporaries plenty of time to find out.

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